

"I smelled coffee. I bet it was a mile away! And I just followed my nose till I got here. Gee, and when I saw that oven of yours I thought the whole woods was on fire." He licked his lips nervously. "Do you think - would it be all right -- I mean could I have some coffee, please?"

Garnet didn't know that boys ever drank coffee but she ran to get him some.

"How long since you et, boy?" she heard Mr. Freebody asking.

And she heard the reply: "Day before yesterday."

"My gosh!" said day's horrified voice at her elbow. "Two days! Give him some pie for Pete's sake. And aren't there any sandwiches left?"

"You ate four of them yourself, if you think back," Garnet reminded him. "And Major cleaned up the crumbs. But he can have some potatoes and a slice of pie, anyway."

Jay was shaking his head. "Gee whiz! Two whole half as many as a person needed.

The boy ate everything that was offered him and drank the strong black coffee eagerly. When he had finished he smiled again. "I guess I'll live now."

Garnet's father began asking questions. 'How old are you?' he said.

"Thirteen," answered the boy, "but I pass for fifteen when I want to."

"What are you doing in these woods at this time of night?" asked her father.

"Yes, and where do you come from? I never seen you before," added Mr. Freebody sternly.

"I was hitchhiking," said the boy. "This afternoon I couldn't get a ride on anything but a hay wagon. I was kind of dizzy from being hungry, I guess, and the hay was so swell and soft that I went to sleep and woke up

way off in the backwoods somewhere. The fellow had unhitched the team in the barn and forgotten all about me. Well, it was night by that time, and when I knocked at the door of this fellow's house, I woke him up and he was kind of sore, so I didn't ask him for anything to eat. He told me to cut through the woods and I'd get back to the highway. I thought maybe I could hop a ride on a truck; there are lots of them on the road at night. But I got lost, and then I smelled coffee and all I could think of was getting to the place where the smell came from."

"Have more," said Garnet.

"No thanks," said the boy: "I ought to be getting along. I want to catch a truck. Thanks a lot for the food." He stood up.

"Just a minute," said Garnet's father. "I think perhaps you'd better tell us a little more about yourself first. Maybe we can help you."

A shadow seemed to pass over the boy's face. You could see that he didn't want to talk about himself, but he sat down again.

"What's your name?" asked Mr. Freebody.

"Eric Swanstrom," answered the boy, and closed his mouth firmly.

"Where are your folks?" persisted Mr. Freebody.

"Haven't any," said Eric, "or if I have I don't know where they are." He looked up. "I'm by myself and I get along all right the way I am. I don't want people thinking they have to look out for me, and I don't want to go to an orphanage. I've taken care of myself for a year and I don't see why I can't for the rest of my life. I like it."

"Ah right, all right," said Mr. Freebody. "But we're entitled to a little information from an unknown boy who walks out of the woods in the middle of the night

and eats up ah the apple pie we got!"

Eric sighed and reluctantly began to speak.

"My people came from Sweden," he said. "My mother died when I was a year old, and my father took care of me from then on. He bought a little farm out in Minnesota. It was nice there; I can still remember it: big trees and stuff. There was a brook to wade in and we had three cows and a couple of goats, and we got along all right till one day my father fell on a pitchfork and hurt his hand. He got blood poisoning after that and he was too sick to walk the five miles into town to the doctor. I was only a kid of four so I couldn't either. We didn't have a telephone. Finally my father sent me to the nearest farmhouse and the folks there went and got the doctor. It was too late then though and my father lost his arm. After that he couldn't do farm work and we sold the place and moved to New York; he thought there'd be more chances there for a crippled man. He bought a newspaper-stand concession. It was a little shed like a box, with one side open and a sort of shelf in front with newspapers on it, and boxes of chocolate bars and chewing gum; things like that. We sold magazines too, and my father always wanted to get a bigger place and sell ginger ale and Coca-Cola in summer time. I used to help him there when I got older. It was big enough inside for just the two of us, a stool for my father and a Little oil stove in winter. It used to get pretty cold though. Our stand was near a subway entrance, and at night when lots of people went home from work I'd stand out in front and bawl as loud as I could 'Evening papers! Get your evening papers here!' One night a big man in an overcoat stopped and asked me how old I was, and when I told him I was seven he said I'd have to go to school. So after that I went to public school every day. But on Saturdays

and all summer, I used to help my father; and on Sunday afternoons we'd shut up shop and go to the park, or the zoo, or take a ride on a ferry boat. We had a pretty good time. But then a year ago my father took sick and died."

Jay and Mr. Freebody got up to put more logs in the kiln, but now the boy didn't seem to want to stop, and he went on talking to Garnet and her father. He was thin, too thin, and his ears stuck out like two pink shells with the firelight behind them.

"The landlady of the boardinghouse where we lived was real good to me; she told me I could stay on there for a while but I knew my father had a cousin named Nelson living in Oregon, he'd stayed with us once in Minnesota and my father'd always liked him. I thought maybe I could go out there and stay with him and work on his farm, so I wrote him a letter. The landlady, Mrs. Cady her name was, wanted me to wait for an answer but I wanted to get out of the city as fast as I could when the newsstand was sold. Most of the money went to pay bills, and there wasn't much left. Mrs. Cady gave me enough for bus fare across the country.

"I didn't ride on the bus much though. I saved the money for food and hitchhiked. At night I slept in haystacks, and old barns, and once when it was raining I spent the night in an empty drainpipe beside the road. It took me three weeks to reach Oregon and when I got to Slaneyville where my cousin lived, they told me in the post office there that he had sold his farm and moved away a couple of months before. They didn't know where, nobody knew. I asked everyone who'd known him at all."

Garnet sat with her chin on her knees looking at Eric and listening. She was trying to imagine sleeping in a drainpipe with the rain making a noise on it, and the

damp coming in at both ends. She was wondering what it would be like to be alone in the world as he was, with no mother or father or brothers; no roof, no bed, no food half the time, no comfort when you were afraid, no scoldings when you were bad. It was hard to imagine.

"Whatever did you do after that?" she asked.

"Well, it was summertime," said Eric. "A fellow there hired me to pick tomatoes for a cannery. While it was warm I could always get jobs picking stuff on the big farms. I made enough money to eat, and keep myself in shoes and overalls; then when I had a little bit extra I'd start hitchhiking again till it ran out, and then I'd get me another job. When people asked questions I told them I was going home to my folks in New York. It was part true; I felt I'd be better off if I worked back towards the East, then if I got in a jam I could go back to Mrs. Cady and she'd help me out. But I didn't want to do it unless I had to. When they still asked questions I'd usually manage to skip out somewhere. I didn't want people interfering with me then, and I don't now." He frowned.

"Take it easy, boy," said Mr. Freebody who had sat down again. "Nobody ain't ageing to interfere with you. They got too much trouble of their own."

"Okay," said Eric apologetically. "Well, anyway, I guess I've picked just about everything there is: tomatoes in Oregon, and berries, and melons; sugar beets in the big fields in Utah and Colorado and later in the summer there were apples and pears and peaches in the orchards everywhere. In the fall I shucked corn in Kansas and Missouri. Some of the guys were swell to work for and some were mean as dirt and paid us next to nothing and were even stingy about the drinking water. I met all kinds of folks, all kinds of kids, some of them making their own livings the way I do. I got into fights and out

of them and I made friends, and I had some good times and some rotten ones, and I didn't starve either, though sometimes, like tonight, I came close to it.

"In the winter it was harder. I stayed in the towns mostly and got jobs washing dishes in lunch wagons and eating places. When I broke a dish I had to pay for it, so I got pretty good after a while, but I don't ever want to see another fried egg as long as I live. Once I worked for a road gang hauling buckets of sand and water, and once I did odd jobs in a garage. I learned to drive when I was there, and I got so I knew a lot about a car.

"In Kansas City I got me a shoe box and shined shoes for ten cents a shine, but a cop there asked me a lot of questions and I got scared. Some of the kids I'd met that bum their way around like I do told me you could get Long rides on freight trains if you were smart, so I got some chocolate and some oranges, sold my shoe box to a fellow, and went down to the train yards at night. There was a freight train on a siding and one of the box-car doors was open. I crawled in and hid behind a crate. After a long time, a couple of hours I bet, someone shut the door and the train began moving. I never knew how long I was there because it was pitch black and I slept a lot. I had enough to eat but I got awful thirsty.

"Finally one night I woke up and wondered why it was so still. Then I knew the train had stopped. The door was open again and moonlight was coming in. I figured this was my chance to skip out; I thought we oughta be somewhere in the East by this time. Well I inched over to the door. Two men were talking on the platform outside; I thought they would never go away. One was telling the other about a toothache he'd had for a week. The other fellow said he oughta have the tooth pulled, but the first one said no, he'd rather keep the ache. Gee I thought they'd never go away. But they did after

a while and I skinned out. I felt stiff all over like an old man, and when I thought I was safe enough to look around the first thing I saw was big mountains all shiny with snow in the moonlight. Where do you suppose I was?" Eric looked up and laughed. "In Colorado, that's where. All that way back again; I felt pretty dumb."

"What happened then?" asked Jay. His eyes were sparkling with excitement. Garnet could tell that he was envying this boy his life of independence and adventure. She didn't envy him, though, for anything but his courage and enterprise.

"I had a bad time after that," said Eric, frowning again. "I don't like to remember it or talk about it. But I got out all right; I always do!"

It was very late. The brilliant firelight and strong shadows gave the place a quality of strangeness. You felt that anything was possible in this moment.

"Look here," said Garnet's father suddenly. "You seem like a person with some sense. Maybe I could use you on my farm for a while. I'm building a new barn and though Jay's pretty good as a helper, I think that if I had two boys working instead of one, I'd get through a lot faster. Would you like to try it?"

Eric's face lit up. "I'd like it fine," he answered. "And I'd work like a steer, I swear I would."

"I'll pay you what I can," said Garnet's father, "and you'll have a place to live and food to eat."

"It'll be swell to have another boy around," said Jay.

Three brothers, thought Garnet? Would she like that? She believed she would but wasn't sure. All the same it was exciting to have a stranger come out of the woods that way and be adopted.

She felt tired now, and leaving the men and boys to talk among themselves, stole back to her blanket under the chokecherry tree. The night sky spread black and

huge above her, and the night sounds had diminished. It was the stillest hour in the world as though all things held their breath perilously, waiting for day to begin.

When she woke up there was heavy dew on everything. The first red rays of the sun touched the watery earth and made it glitter with a thousand rainbow colors. The kiln fire seemed pale and insignificant now, dimmed by the light of day. Near by Jay and Eric lay sound asleep, and her father and Mr. Freebody snatched a moment of rest under a tree. Mr. Freebody was snoring deeply and magnificently. Major was the only other person awake; he had discovered a new delicious smell and was following it anxiously across the grass, shaking his ears and snuffing.

"Major!" called Garnet under her breath, and the dog came wagging over to her and pushed his black, cold nose into her hand. His coat was soaked with dew.

She got up and put fresh coffee in the pot and climbed the narrow foot path to the top of the kiln again. On her way back she stopped and looked down at Eric curiously. She thought it might be nice to have him live with them for a while. His short upper lip and blunt tip-tilted nose had a look of stubborn independence even in sleep; and she knew that his closed lids hid eyes that were clear and thoughtful. Yes, it was a nice face, but too thin. He was too thin all over; his collar bone stuck out like a coat hanger, and sharp wrists protruded from sleeves that were too short.

Her look wakened him; the eyelids new open suddenly, and his face was alive again. His eyebrows twisted in bewilderment.

Garnet laughed. "I'm not dangerous," she explained. "Don't look so suspicious. I'm Garnet Linden and you're going to come home with us and live there as long as you want to. Remember?"

"Gee, for a minute I thought it was a dream," sighed Eric in relief.

Mr. Freebody woke himself up with an earth-shaking snore and started up guiltily.

"Almost fell asleep that time," he remarked. Garnet looked at Eric and he looked at her. Their mouths twitched and they choked on laughter they tried hard to swallow. They shared a private joke at someone's else expense; and suddenly they knew that they were friends.

At seven o'clock they heard the Hausers in their truck a mile away. Merle and Cicero raised healthy, tone-deaf voices and sang because they felt good.

"Neither of them fellas is ever going to make a crooner," said Mr. Freebody, as the singing came nearer and nearer, and got worse and worse.

Jay and Eric sat in the back seat on the way home, and Garnet in front with her father. The green fields fled by on either side. Far, far across the valley a pale streamer of smoke rose from thick woods to show where the kiln still burned. What a night it had been! I will never forget it, Garnet told herself.

The Ford toiled up the slope to their house, lurched in at the gate and shuddered to a stop.

Garnet's mother came out to meet her sooty family. She looked fresh and rosy; and Donald at her side was still spotlessly clean because he had only been up for ten minutes.

Garnet's mother laughed.

"You look like charcoal burners and chimney sweeps," she cried. Then she noticed Eric. "Who is this?"

Garnet pushed Eric forward. He had shoulder blades like a pair of wings.

"This is someone new to belong to our family," she said. "His name is Eric, and he appeared at midnight."

Mrs. Linden was the mother of three children and hardly anything surprised her any more.

"Come in," she said. "There are griddlecakes for breakfast. While you're eating them I'll find out all about you." Garnet went to wash her face and hands.

"I have a nice mother," she thought to herself. "I have a nice family."

It made her feel safe and warm to know that she belonged to them and they to her. No she didn't envy Eric. Not one bit.

In the dim mirror above the sink her face surprised her. It was dark with soot and there were four black stripes along her cheek where she had laid her fingers.

The air was beautiful with the smell of griddlecakes. Garnet splashed, splashed the water over her face and neck and scrubbed and scrubbed with the soap. Blindly she reached for the towel. She could hardly wait to get back to her family; and to the griddlecakes.

VI. Locked In

AS THE days went by it seemed as if there was nothing that Eric couldn't do. He was handy with hammer and saw; he could milk a cow and drive a team or a tractor, he knew all about gardens, and separators, and harness, and often he could tell what the weather would be like the next day. He helped old Henry Jones chisel limestone slabs for the strong piers that were to be the foundation of the barn; and besides all these things he could walk on his hands and do flip-ups, swim like a fish and dive seven different ways; he could talk about far-away places, and people he'd seen and adventures he'd had; and he could eat even more than Jay. He was wonderful.

They all liked him; but after a while Garnet began to